

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D-1

WASHINGTON POST
26 February 1984

Jack Anderson

Gloom on 'Star Wars'

President Reagan's famous "star wars" speech last March, in which he called for development of space weapons that could protect the United States from incoming Soviet missiles, has gained added urgency. The intelligence community has been briefing the president on some alarming new discoveries that could tilt the strategic military balance in favor of the Soviets.

The Pentagon is grimly preparing a response to the commander in chief's request for a missile defense against the latest Soviet advances. The Pentagon claims glumly that an effective defense cannot be achieved before the turn of the century—if ever.

But the military brass are taking an unrealistic view of the problem, with an eye on the extra billions they can demand to bolster our defense. They assume that the Soviet missiles will be 100 times "harder"—less vulnerable to attack—than any that have ever been built. They also insist on an overall defense system that will destroy these super-missiles with a success rate of more than 99 percent.

Saddled with these impossible givens, it's no wonder the Pentagon is getting ready to tell the president that his hopes for an effective defense against Soviet missiles cannot be realized before the year 2000, if then.

This leaves the United States relying on the 20-year-old concept of "mutual assured destruction" (MAD) first propounded by John Kennedy's defense secretary, Robert McNamara. Under this theory, neither superpower will dare to use its nuclear missiles, knowing the other will have enough power left to retaliate after a first strike and destroy the aggressor.

Obviously, the MAD concept depends on both sides' continued vulnerability to nuclear attack. But the intelligence evidence suggests that the Soviets never bought the MAD idea. They have developed better and better anti-

ballistic missile weapons and a massive civil-defense system they think will protect them from nuclear missiles that get through their defensive screen.

In other words, the Soviets have been determinedly trying to change the rules of the deadly MAD game. That's why Reagan called for lasers and other weapons that could knock down Soviet missiles in space; it was a response to the Soviets' efforts to unbalance the MAD equation.

The Pentagon, though, apparently doesn't want to play by the new rules. Its plans for strategic defense of the United States are based on a secret "Defensive Technologies Study" prepared by a panel headed by James Fletcher, former head of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. My associate Dale Van Atta has obtained this report.

While undeniably thorough and technically correct in many respects, the report gives evidence that the Fletcher panel labored under ground rules that relegated its conclusions to the realm of fantasy.

For example, it calls for development of laser weapons that can beam 100,000 "joules" per square centimeter at incoming Soviet missiles. A joule is the standard unit of radiant energy (equal to 10 million ergs, if that's any help).

Here's where the fantasy comes in: secret U.S. tests show that existing liquid-fuel missiles, which make up much of the Soviets' strategic missile force, blow up when hit with as little as 80 joules. Even our harder-shelled MX and Trident missiles will blow up when hit with only about 1,000 joules per square centimeter.

The idea that the Soviets in another 15 years will find material that will make their missiles' shells 100 times tougher than our best missiles' is preposterous. Moreover, the Fletcher panel's report insists that not a single antimissile weapon be developed until the whole elaborate control system is ready to go. This includes tracking of all objects involved in a missile attack, including decoys and debris, and coordination of all this information simultaneously by means of multiple computers.

In effect, this fantastic undertaking would turn strategic warfare into a gigantic Buck Rogers video game. And only after the electronic components are in place does the Pentagon want to start building the actual weapons it will use.

Yet experts tell me that a chemical laser, already well-developed, could be perfected and put in orbit within four years with a crash program. This laser would be capable of destroying any existing Soviet missile—or any likely to be developed within the next few years.

©1984 United Feature Syndicate